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Hopper On History

A Bell Foundry In Millis

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MILLIS – A large bell which was dedicated to the town of Millis in 1976 serves as a reminder that the Holbrook Bell Foundry once manufactured bells in a foundry located on the southwest corner of Main and Spring streets.

According to the Rev. O.E. Jameson, a Millis minister, who wrote the "History of Medway, 1713-1882," a book long out of print, the business of manufacturing bells for church or town clocks, which gave employment to many people and contributed much to the prosperity of the place and which carried the name of the town to almost every habitable portion of the country, was established in 1816 by Major George Holbrook, who moved from Brookfield, Ma. where he first began business in 1797.

Through the assistance of many friends, the shanty in which the bell was cast was built out of the condemned bricks from a neighbor's brick kiln.

The bell was cast in the presence of almost the whole population of the vicinity.

Sides of the building were taken down and the space for the workmen roped around in order that the people might see and the bell makers might have room to work.

The first venture of the bell business was successful. A finely cast, clear-toned bell weighing 1,208 pounds was cast. This bell for many years called the good people of the parish together for the worship of God and to all other public gatherings.

The coming of Major Holbrook into the town had been opposed by many good and well-to-do people who objected to his becoming a citizen for fear that he would become a pauper and a charge upon the town, but immediately upon his production of a bell offers of assistance poured in from every side and a large and successful business was established, one foundry after another being built, each larger and more complete than the predecessor.

Major Holbrook earlier had been in the bell foundry and clock-making firm of Paul Revere, for whom he entertained a warm friendship until his death. The Holbrook bell foundry was in reality, though not legally, the successor of the famous Revere foundry as during the years 1815-1820 it was the only establishment of its kind in America.

The business was carried on successfully by the same family until the year 1882 when the proprietor accepted a position offered to him in the Pension Office Department, Washington, DC.

During the period of its existence, over 11,000 bells were cast at this establishment and sent to all parts of the United States, British Provinces, Mexico and to the Sandwich Islands.

They were exhibited at the industrial exhibitions throughout the country and came into competition with the bells of others and always received the highest awards.

Among other awards was the grand gold medal from the Massachusetts Charitable Association of Boston, for general superiority and pure musical tone.

On another occasion, the grand gold medal of honor of the American Institute of New York was awarded the Holbrook foundry for undoubted superiority and general excellence as compared with the production of others and for their pure and musical tone and extraordinary vibration of their bells.

The very flattering testimonial from this association which accompanied the medal denominated the production of the Holbrook foundry as the standard bells of America.

These complimentary testimonials were from leading musical men and mechanics of the country among whom were Dr. Lowell Mason, George J. Webb and Jonas Chickering, Esq., the famous piano manufacturer of Boston.

Major George Holbrook who established the foundry was a man who had great ingenuity and could work his way out of any mechanical predicament and could successfully plan and lay out the work for others though he possessed no great faculty of doing the work himself. It is to his son, Colonel George H. Holbrook who became an eminent musician, the credit of improving the tone of the bell and changing them from noisy machines to musical instruments is due.

This celebrated musician succeeded his father in the business which he prosecuted until 1872. The business was for several years in charge of E.L. Holbrook, Esq., the son of Colonel Holbrook, until he entered the business of manufacturing church organs which was more agreeable to him and for which his superior musical education fitted him.

E.H.Holbrook, a grandson of Colonel Holbrook, in 1868 became associated with his grandfather in the business and in 1872 succeeded to the full ownership and control until it was relinquished in 1882.

Very few business houses which were in existence in 1816 and which have been constantly carried on by members of the same family can be found.

Few families have ever associated in a business so long continued, so honorably conducted and on which they can look back with so much to be proud of and so little to regret as the proprietors of the Holbrook Bell Foundry.